

Unpleasant Design. Designing Out Unwanted Behaviour.

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Unpleasant Design is an aggregation of techniques and strategies in urban design where social control is an inherent property of objects and places. Unpleasant Design research recognizes the growing desire for controlled environments amongst different authorities but it also accounts for the way citizens react to it. Unpleasant Design is manifested in the form of “silent agents” which manage the behaviour of people without explicit presence of officials.

Unpleasant Design is principally about the relationship of space, design and social interaction. Thus, it is not aimed at harming users of public space in general. Unpleasant Design usually discriminates against particular social groups in order to allow for another to exist. These groups are not always threatening our security, they are sometimes simply a minority or powerless (the teenagers, the poor, marginal groups).

We continuously look for qualifiers for something to act as unpleasant. Our data is an accumulation of field observations of deployed technologies; interviews with scholars and practitioners in the field of urban design. It also includes case studies of particular applications of Unpleasant Designs.

Seeking to reveal power structures beyond surveillance and social control in designed interactions, we offer a critical perspective on emerging design patterns.

Keywords: *Unpleasant, Design, behaviour, public, space*

Introduction

The observation of *Unpleasant Design* implementations in our surrounding is an activity that came out of everyday experience with increasingly estranged urban spaces. From taking numerous photographs of benches, ledges, handrails and sidewalks we became more and more aware of current trends in urban furniture design and restrictive technologies in public space. We gathered a myriad of bench designs that prevent sleeping or long term occupation; stone patterns that were used as surface finish to

prevent sleeping or even sitting on ledges, planters and under staircases; the increasing trend to equip continuous flat surfaces, including bench sides with anti-skating obstacles. After recognizing some basic principles, we extended the object of our study to all senses: lighting, sounds, ventilation systems, pavement structures and even the choice of particular plants became part of the speculation. We combined these with an observation of the demographic structure that was using these spaces.

For instance, the permanent illumination of hallways and corridors of social housing blocks throughout Dutch cities is an example of designing for particular audiences. Strongly illuminated throughout the entire night, there is very little activity to facilitate in its corridors. Illumination was used here to deter suspicious and unwanted behaviour that could easily occur in darkness (Narisada and Schreuder, 2004, p. 45). Such disowned corridors with low-income tenants are often prone to antisocial or even criminal behaviour (Newman, 1972). However, besides the need to create a 'defensible' space, there is an expectancy of a certain level of intimacy in a residential environment which this strong illumination works against. Although disowned corridor design was found to be harmful for the community (Pruitt-Igoe iconic example) the problems of concentrated social disadvantage are much more complex and cannot be addressed only by the physical characteristics of a building (Lens, 2013).

The Nobel Prize winning author Ivo Andric describes such conflict with the illumination process in his "Bridge over Drina". The event revolves around a certain lantern, installed by the newly established Austro-Hungarian authorities at the end of the 19th century. The lantern was illuminating a spot on a bridge where people used to gather at night; sitting, talking, singing and smoking in darkness. By taking away the comfort of darkness, the authorities were not only aiming to modernize the old Kasbah but also discourage behaviour that would normally not occur in the light. Little by little, the residents got used to the lantern. Although it altered their behaviour slightly, as they became more aware of their actions and used to this new visual setting, the light didn't have a substantial impact at residents' night habits. This speculative description of an urban development is a symbolic starting point for our research in the complexities around *Unpleasant Design*.

Definition of Unpleasant Design

Unpleasant Design research examines the relationship between space, design and social interaction. It focuses on urban phenomena in which social control is inherent in the design of objects. This aggregation of design processes and tools is aimed specifically at making people uncomfortable or interfering with their use of public space. The implementations range from architectural interventions within the built environment, to electronic devices modifying and diffusing into our lived environment. *Unpleasant* implementations play a significant role in the way we perceive and engage with public space.

The applications vary from subtle implementations (such as the buzzing “Mosquito” sound that puts off young people) to more radical and broader manifestations, such as Haussmann’s reconstruction of Paris, to name a historical example. The latter allows for a speculative argument that the broadening of streets was intended to facilitate troop movement and prevent easy blocking of streets with barricades (Douglas, 2008; Jordan, 1995). Thus, the detailed physical planning executed a code of social conduct and can be clearly traced back to governmental interest in social control.

In our research, we look for qualifiers for something to act as *unpleasant*. The first to study are material structure and properties of unpleasant applications. Cold and polished surfaces or obfuscated edges allow to propose a taxonomy of objects which carry an *unpleasant* factor for human experience. Secondly, there are certain shapes that are recurrent. Oval and round shapes are found in urban structures preventing sleeping, sitting, littering, skating and similar activities. Finally, perhaps the most enlightening aspect is to look into subversion and misuse of these urban manifestations. Small interventions often reveal the immediacy of *unpleasantness* and emphasize its authoritative character. Dan Lockton states that the bottom line of unpleasantness can be determined by the designer him or herself – if they would not be happy being the recipient of their own designs, then the design is probably *unpleasant* (Savicic and Savic, 2013).

Unpleasant Design research takes account of so-called “silent agents” that manage behaviour in public space, without the explicit presence of authorities (security, police etc.). These “agents” are materialised in objects and installations which ensure that control is enforced in the environment; through the design of urban spaces, urban furniture and communication strategies. The “silent agents” not only restrain unwanted use of space, but

also prevent interactions between the authorities and citizens. Leaving no space for discussion and disobedience, unpleasantly designed objects quietly prevent social disturbance or disorder.

Very often, *Unpleasantness* is an immediate reaction to a problem - added on top of existing structures to address a specific issue or unwanted behaviour. However, *Unpleasant Design* is developing in an integral direction, being at the centre of the design brief and not just an added function. Contemporary urban design discourse is increasingly centred around deterrent functions and less around physical comfort or creating a sense of place.

A perfect example hereby is the Camden bench, developed by Factory Furniture and recently installed at several locations in the London borough of Camden. After a history of problematic seating, the bench was designed to address 28 design issues when it comes to preventing unwanted use (Factory Furniture, 2013). These issues are communicated as 'contemporary street seating needs': to deter rough sleeping, drug dealing, bag theft, to reduce littering, easy to relocate, and so on. Such a list of contemporary seating needs assumes that contemporary urban design is more about prevention than encouragement and that marginal misuse is more likely to be in focus than major use. Additionally, it assumes a bad intention behind potential users, breeding a relationship of mistrust between designers, users and city councils. The fact that this design feature is at the front of product description on the Factory Furniture's website gives an idea about their interests and users they target with design.

This brings us to one of the main characteristics of *Unpleasant Design* strategies which is targeting specific social groups and acting at specific demographic layers. Teenagers, substance misusers and homeless people are frequently official reasons for unpleasant installations in public space. The language of *Unpleasant Design* is always ambiguous. It helps some while being less merciful to others. *Unpleasant Design* is not aimed at simply harming the users of public space in general. We all want our parks and streets to be pleasant. But in order to make them more pleasant for the majority of people, we have to make the space unpleasant for some marginal groups. These groups do not always threaten our security, sometimes they are simply a minority or powerless.

Finally, *Unpleasant Design* is characterised by a perverted user-centric approach. It treats the design object from an anti-user perspective, resulting in a design brief which examines restrictions as core design problems. As we have seen with the example of the Camden bench, its most important

feature is not usability (although designers claim it features more inclusive seating, encouraging social interaction (Unpleasant Design Team, 2013a)) it is unusability by clearly defined (mis)users.

From a historical perspective, the relation between designer and user has not taken this path before. We can trace the beginnings of usability and user-centred design to the post World War II period, with the study of design ergonomics and human-centred design research (Dreyfuss, 1960). The observation of potential positive influences of design on user experience was systematically pursued. With the introduction of ethnographic methods, the human focus was even more stressed, placing people in the middle of design (Koskinen et al., 2011). Contrary to this, *Unpleasant Design* places authority in the middle and makes sure people do not cross limits set by it.

While some *Unpleasant Design* solutions are employed by the city authorities, others are installed by corporate security and management systems. Very often, the borderline between the public and private interest isn't clear. In the past decades we can observe that governmental efforts to enhance public space have been replaced by private developers; transforming open space into privatized zones of interest (Francis, 1988; Minton, 2009). Through a collection of texts, photographs and designs, we aimed at recognising this nascent discipline within contemporary design taxonomies.

The language of Unpleasantness

As we have briefly suggested above, there are some overarching patterns to *Unpleasant Design* manifestations in the city. They could be most generally grouped into surface treatment, shape modifications (curves, angles or slopes) and sensory interventions (like light, sound, touch, smell). It is interesting to set this list against the list of elements identified by Whyte (Whyte, 1980) which constitutes a successful public space. According to Whyte, "what makes a place work" is (1) sitting, (2) food, (3) retailing, and, in the case of indoor public spaces, availability of (4) toilets. We will briefly explain each of Whyte's elements, thus setting the ground for *Unpleasant Design* to be introduced within them. One should note the fact that Whyte's research was conducted some 40 years ago, thus some ideological changes in the view of the role and desired character of public space exist. Nevertheless, many of his observations are quite contemporary and can be applied today as well.

Sitting

Sitting is the most important element for Whyte and it is easily attainable. "People sit mostly where there is place to sit". However, people also like to be able to choose where they will sit. Thus they will prefer a place that is more socially comfortable (close to other people or at a distance, with a preferably good overview of activity around) over simple physical comfort. "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people" (Whyte, 1980, p. 19). Sitting has to provide something to observe or participate in.

Food

Availability of snacks and fast food is a cause for, but also an effect of lively social life on the street. Street vendors of snacks and drinks recognise places that "work", which in turn makes them even more popular.

Retailing

Shops and small services (sewing, knitting, shoe fixing, tourist services) are key continuous attractions in public space. They bring additional pedestrian flow while enriching the street front with diverse activities. Retailing for Whyte is an opposite of offices or banks which have a tendency to render the space sterile and estranged. He argues for turning commercial spaces on the pedestrian level into a mandatory zone for retail.

Toilets

According to Whyte, the existence of toilets has a considerable effect on people's shopping patterns. Toilets act as yet another attraction within the pedestrian walking path, both indoor and outdoor.

As we have discussed already, the intention behind *Unpleasant Design* is to make places functional for certain kinds of audiences. The problem of *Unpleasant Design* is exclusion. This is how *Unpleasant Design* targets its anti-audience.

The sitting problem

Each of Whyte's key aspects of sitting in public space is addressed by *Unpleasant Design*. Firstly, it is possible and confirmed in practice to remove seats from public space altogether. For example, the Camden bench was commissioned after the council repeatedly denied the public from sitting in the streets and squares of the borough, by removing public benches. With

reduced quantities of sitting places, the sitting choices are qualitatively impoverished as well.

Contemporary urban seating is often arranged in distanced configurations. They end up being too close for people who don't sit together and too far for the ones who are engaged in a conversation. This is one of the proofs social comfort is usually the smallest concern when *unpleasantness* is designed into an otherwise functional object.

A central armrest is another feature with an impact on social comfort. Besides preventing rough sleeping, it assigns each person on the bench a specific amount of space and puts a limit on possible sitting configurations on the bench.

Waved surfaces are another link in the chain of inventions around public benches. Not only does it make it uncomfortable to sleep on, it renders the surface dangerous for skaters.

The food problem

One of the consequences of people's presence on the streets, especially when they are eating in public, is littering. To address this problem, city authorities would normally put up bins in most frequented streets and squares. These bins became a target themselves for concentrated litter, often overfilled or used as a surface to leave garbage. Thus, the new bin design in many cities includes a very small opening for throwing articles in while the top is curved or inclined to prevent anything from being put there.

The retailing problem

A well known side effect of popularity of retail streets are posters and commercials. They are usually glued to dedicated surfaces, outgrowing this space quickly when no control is imposed on them. What typically works against this phenomenon is a rippled surface finish that deters sticking and gluing to such a surface. It is often applied on garbage bins and traffic poles (Unpleasant Design Team, 2013b). Other examples of unpleasant surfaces include rich graphical patterns which make tags and scribbles hardly noticeable. Berlin metro seating is covered with such patterns, while windows are decorated with an ornament representing Berlin's landmark, the Brandenburg Gate. While most people would think that this is a touristic emphasis, it was actually deployed to discourage glass etching by graffiti taggers.

The most unpleasant surface to touch are handrails coated by sanding paper-like lacquer. A speculative interpretation of this measure is that it is

used to prevent suicides (Unpleasant Design Team, 2011a). Found on a very tall bridge in Vevey, Switzerland, this material is supposed to discourage the jump, when the contact with the railing is designed to be utterly unpleasant.

The toilet problem

Public toilets are a contested topic, often rendered dysfunctional by inappropriate use and maintenance. Because they provide basic privacy, they are a known target to drug addicts who use them as a hideout. Different city authorities deal with it differently; some provide a trash bin for syringes nearby, some install particularly coloured lights to render veins invisible. Blue neon lights were successfully used in public bathrooms and publicly accessible toilets (BBC News, 2003). Because veins are harder to see, it is expected that drug users will stop using these bathrooms for the aforementioned purpose.

Expanding Whyte's observations

Other examples of light use are as interesting. For instance, the Japanese Keihin Railway company experimented with blue lights at metro stations to prevent suicides. Triggered by high rates of suicides and supported by some psychological experts, these installations are supposed to have a calming effect on people (Demetriou, 2009; Saldaña, 2011). While blue light in this case targets people in a particular state of mind (at the edge of committing suicide in impulse) a resident's association in Mansfield, UK used pink lights against the contested problem of teenage loitering (BBC News, 2006). Whether or not the reasons for this speculative measure were justified, the lights supposedly highlight skin blemishes (a technique traditionally used by beauticians (Robinson, 2009)) thus targeting the whole generation of people whose hormones are changing with puberty.

Another biological characteristic of young people is target to other forms of unpleasant inventions. A high frequency buzz (17,4KHz) is employed to keep away teenagers from gathering in shopping malls, street corners, courtyards and to prevent so-called 'anti social behaviour'. "Mosquito", as this device is called, targets specifically the population under the age of 25 due to their hearing abilities. Unlike their older cohabitants, the young population should be able to hear the repelling sound buzz at 5 dB above background noise levels (Unpleasant Design Team, 2011b).

Extending unpleasant applications to technology, contemporary surveillance techniques deserve some attention. Simple video surveillance systems are enhanced with facial recognition and motion tracking, rendering

extraordinary discrimination possibilities. The discriminatory practices developed in CCTV operator rooms (Graham and Marvin, 2001) was in this way integrated in CCTV systems to target and track specific individuals by the colour of their skin or the way they walk. The latter is particularly addressed by gait recognition technique, using satellite imagery to recognize and trace a person by the way they walk (Sanders, 2002).

Procedures and findings

Every design process, both from a technical and from an aesthetic perspective, is ideological (Dunne and Raby, 2001). Hence, its features, structures or methods of operation, in which a user interacts with it, can be controlled. Our exploration of the *Unpleasant Design* phenomenon often took the form of observations in public space, recording the way it affected users and the way users attempted to overcome it. We took numerous photographs of these sites and grouped them into categories depending on the senses they affected and behaviours they typically addressed. Finally, we came up with two general groups: 'devices' and 'objects', determined by the kind of agency they exert over the users. Devices are systems that are able to broadcast or record information which can be used to condition people in public space. Different light and sound installations as well as surveillance systems described above belong to this group. Objects are installations, interventions and adaptations of regularly found urban furniture which discourage particular uses and misuses. Benches are most often target to such interventions, or a complete redesign. Obstacles are often used against skaters. Surface treatment can address posters and stickers, suicide or high heels.

Early on in our study, we encountered similar initiatives that shared their collections on blogs and web pages (Dan Lockton's "Design With Intent", Survival Group's "Antisites", etc.) with great examples of *Unpleasant Designs*. Some also set up solid taxonomies. What began to interest us then, was an overall strategic view of the development of *Unpleasant Design*; is there or can there be something like a school of thought for 'unpleasantness'? Who prescribes *unpleasantness* to spaces, and who receives it? Who is profiting from it the most and which groups are mostly its targets?

To learn more about these questions, we conducted an interview series with scholars, experts, artists and designers who were in some way knowledgeable about *Unpleasant Design*. Dan Lockton, a scholar

researching application of persuasive design for social and environmental benefit, talked about potential uses of *Unpleasant Design* solutions for behavioural change. Yasmine Abbas, a researcher particularly interested in 'neo-nomadism' elaborated on challenges people with a mobile life style have to face in contemporary urban environment and to what extent they can contribute to places. We also interviewed people who can be identified as "*Unpleasant Designers*". Designers who are actively involved in coming up with *Unpleasant Design*, restrictive and persuasive artifacts. From Factory Furniture, a design office based in London, we learned about their design process, restrictions they encounter and sources of inspiration.

An insightful way to identify *Unpleasant Design* is to look at resistance techniques used by its target social groups, urban activists and citizens in general. Through direct contact with some of these groups we learned about their strategies and points of view. We then poured these findings into a call for participation in a design competition, for which we received several intriguing submissions.

In our research of *Unpleasant Design*, we tried to go beyond cataloging and collecting existing designs. We also decided not to focus on designing counter-unpleasant applications. Instead, we decided to try a psychological technique of role-playing to better understand the underlying tactics and recipes for unpleasantness. We applied this approach at a series of workshops we taught, using *Unpleasant Design* to discuss more general questions about reclaiming public space. The role playing technique relies on our ability to imagine and act out behaviours that are not always in line with our own point of view. While playing a role, we put ourselves in the shoes of the other and imagine what they would do in a particular situation. In our case, we imagined various roles; we switched between city counsellors and real estate developers, from conservative citizen associations to senior residents. Those protagonists would act against a certain social group or behaviour that had a particularly harmful impact on our activities.

Conclusions

With *Unpleasant Design* tools we can address some of the issues that arise around the management, control and sharing of public space. To a certain extent, unwanted behaviour can be 'designed out'. However, the cold mechanism which lies behind these agents might play well on turning the problem invisible, but will fail in solving the root of the problem in the

long run. They only address the consequences (homelessness) and not the root (career break, domestic violence, substance misuse, psychological problems, etc.)(Shelter England, 2014).

To the contrary, as the research of Dan Lockton shows, it is more sustainable to promote positive behaviour by design (Lockton et al., 2012). This was already clear to Whyte, who argued for a kind of spatial self-regulation, or the simple presence of people to discourage suspicious and undesired behaviour (Whyte, 1980, p. 63).

Historically, we can recognize two parallel intellectual traditions in thinking about management and use of public space. They are two opposing forces in the 'battle' for safe and pleasant space. On one hand, we have the writings of Jane Jacobs, promoting a network of voluntary controls amongst people themselves (Jacobs, 1961). On the other hand, it is the feeling of ownership amongst neighbours that leads to well managed, and defensible places (Newman, 1972). The principal difference between these traditions is their view of strangers. In Jane Jacobs' opinion, the presence of strangers on the street promotes normality and reduces suspicious behaviour. Newman on the other hand describes strangers as uninterested to contribute to places thus possibly the protagonists of suspicious behaviour themselves. They so become a legitimate target to *Unpleasant Designs* and the like.

From these two reference points to today, we can observe a change in discourse about public space and what it should stand for. When we look at the language of "*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*", it is clear that the idea of accessibility and equity in public space has changed, inclining towards more restrictive and discriminative policies. Today, it is accepted in practice and theory that one has right to design for particular social groups, that the shopping malls have the right to protect themselves from loiters and the poor (the non-clientele) and that 'irrational' use of public space (sitting too long, or even worse – sleeping) is absolutely a no-go. This wasn't as black and white in the past as mixed use of spaces was considered a positive sign – it meant that the space served its democratic purpose – all people. Although Whyte's view of homeless and poor can be considered somewhat benevolent, his points of view and recommendations for developers were adopted by the city planning councils.

When social incompatibilities occur, *Unpleasant Design* addresses them in a persuasive manner. We should acknowledge that design outcomes depend largely on target users. The perceived level of coercion depends on perceived level of control (Savic and Savic, 2013). Dan Lockton believes *Unpleasant Design* is usually unaware of its outcome. "In the same way that

someone who puts out mousetraps to kill house mice doesn't necessarily 'hate' mice, someone who puts spikes on a wall to stop people sitting there doesn't necessarily 'hate' people. There's a problem, and they're trying to solve it." (Savicic and Savic, 2013).

Unpleasant Design is mostly the industry response to the current situation, aiming at getting us to the preferred situation through a shortcut. The artifacts are not particularly considered from a design perspective. With this text we have tried to trace its outputs and give a structure to the growing body of *Unpleasant Design* examples. We hope this will contribute to *Unpleasant Design* knowledge. Whether the effect of *Unpleasant Design* is positive for public space or not, knowledge in this field will contribute to better informed decision making on the side of city authorities, as well as citizens.

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